

**TESTIMONY OF OLIVIA A. GOLDEN
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BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES
FOR THE
FISCAL YEAR 2001 AND 2002 PERFORMANCE AND SPENDING
OVERSIGHT HEARING
February 26, 2002**

Good morning Chairperson Allen and members of the Committee on Human Services. I am Olivia Golden, Director of the District of Columbia Child and Family Services Agency. Thank you for the opportunity to come before you to report on CFSA's first eight months of operation as a new District government agency. As you know, the agency came out of federal court Receivership on June 15, 2001, thanks to Mayor Williams' leadership and the City Council's support. The past eight months have been intense, and the pace of change has been enormous. Much of what we have been able to accomplish in such a short time is the result of the tremendous support and encouragement we have received from Chairperson Allen and other members of the Council. For this, I am very grateful.

Since CFSA's return to District government on June 16, we have virtually completed a tremendously ambitious set of institutional reforms focused on dismantling the structural and legal barriers that for so long stood in the way of accomplishing the agency's mission: promoting the safety, permanence, and wellbeing of the District's abused and neglected children. As a result of the new agency's responsibilities and structure are dramatically different from those of the District's prior child welfare agencies, both under Receivership and when child welfare was a division within the Department of Human

Services. The consent order provided a framework for the structural reforms to achieve a major overhaul of child welfare in the District of Columbia, including the following elements:

- Enabling legislation that established CFSA as a Cabinet level agency under the Mayor with independent personnel and procurement authority, licensing authority for foster homes and group homes, and responsibility for the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children;
- Unification under CFSA of the responsibility for abuse and neglect investigation and services, a provision of the enabling legislation which was implemented effective October 1, 2001, thus ending the fragmentation that had been a key barrier to serving families effectively;
- Promulgation of the District's first licensing regulations for group homes (September 21, 2001) and foster homes (July 28, 2001); and publication of the first regulations to govern independent living facilities just last Friday (February 22, 2002);
- Reform of the legal support provided to CFSA social workers, including more than doubling the number of attorneys so social workers can always be represented in court, providing sufficient paralegal support, and restructuring legal services to enable much closer coordination between attorneys and social workers and provide for an attorney-client relationship with CFSA;
- Passage of Family Court legislation that will operate under a "one family, one judge" system which, when fully implemented, will bring the cases now spread across over 59 judges under 12 to 15 specially trained, well-supported

judges who will stay with a child's neglect proceeding from the beginning until the child achieves a permanent family. Similar systems in other jurisdictions have dramatically reduced the time children spend in care and improved the teamwork and quality of decision-making by all the professionals – social workers, lawyers, judges – who are working on behalf of the child and family.

These institutional changes are critical, because they position us to achieve dramatically improved outcomes for children and families: to keep children safe, ensure that children grow up in permanent families, and promote the wellbeing of the most vulnerable children and most fragile families. And we know that we must aim for dramatic improvement, because over these eight months, we have gathered a great deal of detailed information regarding the past performance of the District's fragmented child welfare system and the outcomes it produced for children. Our in-depth review of available information has benefited greatly from the fact that, along with a review of Agency data and the observations of staff, external partners, and national experts, we have been able to rely on two valuable independent assessments of child welfare practices and performance in the District, the Court Monitor's baseline report and the recently issued Department of Health and Human Services' Child and Family Services Review report, which we submitted to you last week. The two reports are generally consistent in highlighting a key set of issues that characterized the fragmented system; for example, children lingering far too long in care without a permanent family and moving too many times while in care, staff with caseloads too high to enable them to plan for children's futures,

and the need for attention to the “front end” of the system where reports of abuse and neglect are investigated. We are proud that while the reports recognize the severity and complexity of the system’s problems and the formidable challenges ahead, they also recognize our achievements to date and express optimism for the future.

We didn’t wait to receive these reports before starting to solve the problems. Instead, we moved right away to develop and implement a strategic plan that gave us a framework to improve results for children. The strategic plan is based on a set of core principles: that the Agency must be revamped to support those who work most directly with children and families, namely our social workers, foster and adoptive parents, and community partners; we must constantly focus on achieving measurable results that improve the lives of our most vulnerable children; and we must have accurate and timely information about our needs and challenges in order to plan and go forward.

CFSA’s strategic plan has seven priority goals:

1. **Recruit and Retain Social Workers.** Recruit and retain a well-qualified, well-trained, highly motivated staff sufficient in number to bring caseloads within court-mandated levels and to provide appropriate services.
2. **Investigate Abuse and Neglect Reports.** Investigate all reports of abuse and neglect in a timely and high quality manner.
3. **Expedite Permanency for Children.** Ensure that children grow up in permanent families, either by returning home or otherwise moving expeditiously to permanent homes.

4. **Recruit and Retain Foster and Kinship Homes.** Increase the number, quality, and appropriateness of foster and kinship homes and other placements, and support these placements with needed services.
5. **Link Families with Neighborhood-based Resources.** Link families with neighborhood and community-based resources, including both formal and informal supports, to strengthen families and promote children's development.
6. **Enhance Agency Information Systems.** Enhance the Agency's information systems so that accurate and timely data about children and families, services provided, quality of services, and outcomes are available and actively used in decision-making at every level of the Agency.
7. **Complete Court Requirements.** Successfully complete the probationary period and end the Receivership, as a step on the way to fully meeting the requirements of the LaShawn Modified Final Order (MFO).

In just eight months, we have already:

- Put in place a top-notch management team, drawn from both within and outside the agency, who have a wealth of management experience and expertise to lead the Agency's transformation. We have also realigned the Agency's organizational structure to place the core case-carrying social work staff at the very center of the organization, elevate our focus on foster and adoptive parents, create a new focus on the quality of clinical practices inside the Agency, and establish a new office of Licensing and Monitoring to ensure quality among outside providers.

- Taken important early steps toward improving our recruitment and retention of social workers, employing a number of innovative strategies, including strengthening relationships with local universities; exploring partnerships with the U.S. Public Health Services Commissioned Corps to recruit and hire social workers from a national pool, and with a foundation partner on a targeted recruitment plan; and recruiting nationally for both MSW and BSW level social workers. As a result, 44 social workers, both MSWs and BSWs, have been hired since October 1, 2001. In addition, we are paying special attention to retaining the dedicated and experienced social workers who have served the Agency well. Retention efforts include specialized training units for entering workers, an intensive focus on appropriate caseload assignments across workers, improved legal and administrative support for social workers, and management support and participation in the Agency's Retention Committee. I, personally, have spent a lot of time since I first came onboard meeting with social workers in brown bag sessions and other forums to learn as much as possible first-hand about their experience, interests, and concerns. This spring, I plan to spend a significant portion of my time on recruitment and retention efforts. I anticipate that our outreach efforts to the universities will pay off with a large pool of candidates from this year's graduating classes.
- Successfully accomplished, on time, the unification process that ended the previously bifurcated neglect and abuse systems. This was accomplished through an intense transition process involving virtually every organizational unit of the Agency, including programs, training, finance, contracts, facilities,

and information systems. I want to particularly highlight the change in our role at the front end of the system, where we now investigate reports of abuse as well as neglect, a responsibility which used to lie with the Metropolitan Police Department. As I testified before the joint hearing of the Committees on Judiciary and Human Services last month, we now handle all of the child abuse and neglect investigations, coordinating closely with MPD in those cases where there is a possibility of criminal prosecution. To prepare for this new responsibility, we trained all intake workers on a core curriculum developed by CFSA and MPD jointly to address the dynamics of abuse, abuse investigation protocol, and forensic interviews. We drew on local as well as national experts for both this core training and additional more advanced and specialized training, which is ongoing. We have dedicated a special unit to investigate sexual abuse and the most serious cases of physical abuse, in close coordination with MPD's role of criminal investigation, while other abuse cases as well as neglect cases are handled by other units. We have also expanded the intake staff by 6 experienced staff and established a specialized training unit with 6 new staff, on the way to an intended expansion of 20 social workers in intake. Finally, under the direct leadership of CFSA's Principal Deputy Director and with assistance from national experts to ensure that we take advantage of best practices from around the country, we are finalizing new policy and protocols for conducting investigations.

- Established a new legal structure within the Agency, more than doubling the number of lawyers, from 16 to 41. We are now able to have legal

representation for our social workers in approximately 75% of all court hearings, with a goal of 100% coverage by October 1, 2002. I am proud to announce that we have recently filled one of the two key new positions, Deputy General Counsel for Litigation at CFSA, who is responsible for supervising this expanded legal staff and making our new structure for legal support real. The role of the Deputy General Counsel for Litigation is critical to the establishment of a fully functional legal structure that enables social workers to devote more time to providing direct services to our children and families. The selection process for the General Counsel is still underway.

- In keeping with our philosophy that children do better in family-like settings, we successfully relocated ***all*** of the children previously housed in off-site respite centers. These respite centers were designed as short-term, emergency group home facilities that provided little in the way of ancillary services. Of the 157 children relocated since September, most were placed in family settings, including being returned home, placed with relatives, or with foster families.
- Published, for the first time ever, District regulations that set standards of quality for foster and group homes and established a new Office of Licensing and Monitoring within CFSA. The completion of foster and group home licensing standards is a significant accomplishment. These standards address the major aspects of safety and quality, including staffing, training, management, and facility maintenance.

- Taken significant steps to improve the Agency's information systems.

Through a series of weekly meetings devoted to caseload information, we have, for the first time, generated accurate caseload information by worker, as well as resolved a wide range of other data problems that have plagued the system. We have also dramatically increased senior staff level attention to the automated reports and the quality of information, holding senior managers accountable for performance based on information generated by the automated system. The continued improvement of our information systems is a major priority for the Agency.

- Focused special attention on recruiting and retaining foster, adoptive and kinship parents. From the very beginning of my tenure with the Agency, I have been meeting with foster, adoptive and kinship parents to learn from them about how we can better support them, as well as to enlist them as partners in our outreach and recruitment efforts. In January of this year, I established an Ombudsman's office reporting directly to my Chief of Staff to serve as an advocate for our foster and adoptive parents. Additionally, a major feature of our organizational realignment was the consolidation of the units responsible for recruitment, training, and support for foster, kinship and adoptive parents under the Deputy Director for Community Services Programs.

- Established, in accordance with the consent agreement, a National Advisory Panel of distinguished child welfare experts to provide technical assistance and guidance as we move forward with our reform efforts. The panel is

funded by the Casey Foundation, which includes support for a staff director. Representing a diversity of backgrounds, including members who have a link with the DC community and those with outside perspectives, panel members have substantive expertise in reforming major urban child welfare systems. We have also started putting together a Local Advisory Board consisting of a diverse group of stakeholders committed to helping the Agency succeed in its mission.

2001 AND 2002 INVESTMENTS

The District made a major investment in the Child and Family Services Agency in FY2001, an investment which was critical to the accomplishments identified above, which demonstrated the deep commitment of both the Mayor and the City Council to the District's most vulnerable children and which was key to the termination of the Receivership. More specifically, the District made both a major initial investment in the agency – an increase of \$37 million over FY2000 – and a continuing commitment in the Consent Order dated October 2000 to future funding increases required, unless the District can demonstrate that compliance with the MFO can be achieved with less funding. The major initial investment provided in FY2001 enabled the agency to raise payment rates for foster parents so that they could better meet the needs of children (and so that more foster parents can be recruited and retained to serve our children), to put in place financial incentives to recruit and retain social workers, and to make other key service investments.

A recent story illustrates the way in which these resources, along with the commitment and dedication of CFSA staff, have already made a difference to children's safety, permanence, and wellbeing:

In early December, CFSA intervened in a situation where a 31-year-old woman was trying to provide shelter for two children who are relatives who had been placed with her as a result of neglect in their previous home, as well as her own two children. She was living in extremely difficult conditions, including no heat.

Within two weeks, the CFSA social worker had secured adequate housing for this family. She assisted with the Section 8 application and, using emergency cash assistance funds, paid the rental deposit and utility fees. As a result of these swift and decisive actions on the part of the Kinship Care worker and her unit, as well as the availability of the emergency cash assistance funds, the mother now resides in a clean and warm four bedroom home with her four children. In addition, the mother has completed the kinship care classes, which provide her with the training she needs to become licensed as a kinship foster parent and to receive a continuing foster care stipend to help support her in caring for the children. She has now been transferred to the Adoption Program, where she will begin the process of adopting her two relative children, both of whom are developmentally and mentally challenged teenagers.

As this story illustrates, resources such as emergency cash assistance, the foster care subsidy available to licensed kinship and non-kin foster families, and

subsidized adoption are key to supporting families in caring for their children and accomplishing the goals we all have: that children will be safe, that they will grow up in permanent families, and that they will thrive.

As CFSA emerged from Receivership in the last months of FY2001, we discovered that the actual expenditures for costs related to the placement of children who cannot live safely at home were above the amounts budgeted for FY2002, particularly with regard to adoption subsidies and emergency group homes. As soon as we learned this, we moved swiftly to conduct a much more detailed analysis of the underlying caseload, expenditure, and child placement patterns than had ever been done previously, and we discovered two primary reasons that the FY2002 budget had failed to reflect an accurate baseline level of needed expenditures:

- Nationally and in the District, expenditures for adoption subsidies – payments that assist families with the costs incurred when they adopt special needs children from foster care - have expanded dramatically in recent years, a very positive development that reflects success in enabling children to find permanent homes. Due to failures in past budget tracking, the FY2002 budget had failed to reflect this increase, reflecting an adoption subsidy cost at the FY99 baseline level of \$6 million rather than at the estimated \$16 million actual level for FY2002 (both numbers include Federal plus local dollars).
- In FY2001, expenditures on emergency group homes for children expanded dramatically, reflecting the placement of children in the temporary group settings described above. These settings are very expensive, and the costs had not been

reflected in the baseline budget. As noted above, we have moved rapidly to ensure that children will not be placed in these settings in the future, but increased costs have still been incurred in 2002.

As a result of these past failures to correctly estimate the costs of placement, we are working with the District to address a gap of approximately \$11 million in additional local dollars that is required to meet children's needs at the baseline level in FY2002. We are working vigorously to address much of this gap through improved Federal funding strategies. We are fully committed to ensuring dramatic improvements in the agency's capacity to track, analyze, and project expenditures in the future and believe we have already made major progress in this regard in just a few months.

NEXT STEPS

Building on the major changes laid out above, we are moving rapidly ahead to meet the ambitious goals in our strategic plan. Key next steps in the months ahead include:

- New partnerships to recruit social workers nationwide as well as from local universities, taking full advantage of the spring graduation season to highlight the reforms in the District's child welfare system;
- Expanded recruitment for adoptive and foster families, as well as next steps in supporting the parents who are already reaching out to vulnerable children;
- An expanded partnership with the Superior Court to implement both our new model of legal support and the Family Court legislation, with the goal of enabling children to move much faster to permanent families. Achieving this goal will make a major difference in children's lives and will also strengthen the District's

compliance with the Federal and District Adoption and Safe Families Acts and the LaShawn Order; and

- The development of border agreements with Maryland and Virginia, to create a metropolitan approach to homes for our children and to take away some of the bureaucratic steps that now make it time-consuming to place children with families – even kin – who live just over the border in another jurisdiction.

Our sense of urgency in moving ahead on these and other plans is driven by our sense of what is at stake for children, as well as by the very specific timeline of the Federal court in LaShawn. On May 31, in just over three months, we will be assessed by the Court Monitor in LaShawn to determine how much improvement there has been on a variety of measures since the close of the Receivership, one year previously. Our ability to show demonstrable improvements in every area of agency performance, from the percentage of reports investigated on time to the number of adoptions completed, will be key to the decision of the Federal Court on whether to end the probationary period and reaffirm the end of the Receivership and the emergence of CFSA as a District agency.

In conclusion, I would like to express my gratitude for your leadership, commitment, and support, which have enabled us, in the eight months that CFSA has been a District agency, to put in place a tremendously promising structure for reform, dismantling barriers that have stood for years in the way of success for children. The task ahead of us now is to keep steady at the work of turning that new structure into truly different results in the lives of children and families. Even in just eight months, we can see change

for children: for the children who go straight to a family after experiencing the trauma of being removed from their home, rather than spending weeks in a group care facility and then having to move again; for the children who can stay with a foster family rather than have to move and experience loss or failure yet again, because when the foster family is at the end of their rope, they can now ask for a disruption conference to provide the supports they need to go on; and for the children who are benefiting from immediate community services to keep them safe.

Yet there is so much more to do to reach all of our children. Completing the work will not be easy, but I am convinced we can do it together, with continued investment of critical resources, continued leadership and support from across the community, and continued commitment to the safety, permanence, and wellbeing of our children.

Thank you. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.